The Bodily Transformations of Girls and Wives in Emily Dickinson's Poems

Research Thesis

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In this paper, I examine the physically transformative aspects of marriage and death in Emily Dickinson's poems. Dickinson has written a plethora of poems that explicitly compare marriage and death. In such poems, a female speaker either anticipates undergoing or has already undergone a radical transformation from an unmarried "maid" to a married "wife." The speaker often draws parallels between her experience of this change to the experience of dying. The speaker also emphasizes that the transformation is irreversible and occurs within the female body.

Of the many poems Dickinson wrote on marriage and death, the five I have chosen to analyze in depth are "A Wife – at daybreak – I shall be" (F185), "I'm 'wife' – I've finished that – " (F225), "He put the Belt around my life –" (F330), "Rearrange a 'Wife's' Affection!" (F267), and "My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –" (F764). Each of these poems is told from the perspective of a speaker communicating from a distinct temporal location within the context of transformation. "A Wife – at daybreak – I shall be" (F185) and "Rearrange a 'Wife's' Affection!" (F267) are poems spoken by persons who have yet to experience the transformation from "maid" to "wife." The speaker of "A Wife – at daybreak – I shall be" (F185) is more proximal to her transformation than the speaker of "Rearrange a 'Wife's' Affection." The speakers of "I'm 'wife' – I've finished that –" (F225), "He put the Belt around my life –" (F330), and "My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –" (F764) have all transformed into wives. For a visual representation of this temporal delineation, please refer to Figure 1 (below).

Key for Figure 1:

A	"Rearrange a 'Wife's' Affection" (F267)
B	"A Wife – at daybreak – I shall be" (F185)
C	"I'm "wife" – I've finished that –" (F225)

D	“He put the belt around my life –” (F330)
E	“My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun” (F764)

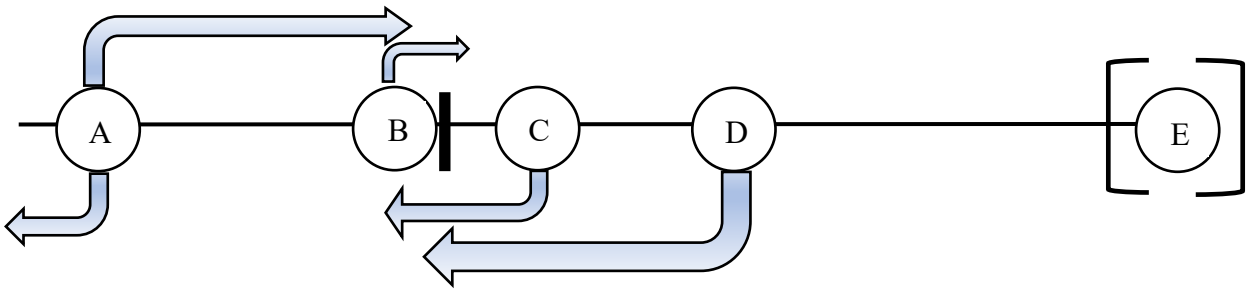

Figure 1: Temporal locations of the poems

The temporal location of each poem determines which aspects of the transformation are discussed within the poem. For example, the speaker of “A Wife – at daybreak – I shall be” (F185) speaks from just before she experiences the change, so she prospectively discusses the transformation, while the speaker of “I'm ‘wife’ – I've finished that –” (F225) speaks from post-transformation, so she speaks retrospectively. “Rearrange a ‘Wife’s’ Affection” (F267) is the only poem of those I have analyzed that speaks both prospectively and retrospectively, and this occurs because she both reflects on her past years of devotion *and* contemplates her future as a wife. “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun – ” (F764) features a speaker that is temporally isolated. This speaker, the “Loaded Gun,” is temporally removed because the timeline on which she speculates is shorter in temporal distance than the other poems, and she does not discuss her life pre-transformation. Instead, she collapses this temporal space completely and portrays her narrative as having begun in a different context than the other speakers do.

I will cover five key topics in this analysis. First, I will discuss the narrative of the transformation presented in “A Wife – at daybreak – I shall be” (F185), which outlines the essential aspects of the girl’s perspective prior to transformation. Next, I will examine “I'm ‘wife’ – I've finished that –” (F225), which depicts the retrospective position of the transformed wife. Then, I will move to an analysis of the more complex poems “He put the belt around my life –” (F330), “Rearrange a ‘Wife’s’ Affection” (F267), and “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun” (F764), each of which represent the terms outlined in my first two analyses with intrinsic variations. First, I will discuss the negative portrayal of marriage illustrated in “He put the belt around my life –” (F330). Next, I will delve into the aspects of physical experience that the speaker of “Rearrange a ‘Wife’s’ Affection” (F267) outlines both retrospectively as a girl, and prospectively as a wife. Finally, I will explore the portrait of marriage depicted in “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun” (F764), which portrays a speaker who has become the ultimate wife by devoting her body to her husband.

Dickinson uses the framework of marriage as a physical transformation that resembles death in terms of gravity in order to depict the similarities in how patriarchal figures affect the bodies of women and girls. Dickinson also seeks to comment on the ways in which girls may anticipate marriage as a form of victory, as marriage was seen as the most important event of a Victorian girl’s life. However, Dickinson also provides the testimony of married women in her post-transformation poems in order to portray the ways that patriarchal figures irreversibly affect the bodies of women, and also how marriage for Victorian women may not be victory whatsoever; marriage may end in disappointment, oppression, or a complete loss of identity.

The Narrative of Transformation

Emily Dickinson's "A Wife – at daybreak – I shall be –" (F185) narrates the physical transformation of a "Maid" to a "Wife" as a linear event that takes place within a temporally limited space. Dickinson utilizes language that evokes marriage ("Wife," "Bride") and death ("Angels" "Eternity," and "Savior" in an alternate line) in order to claim a connection between the two states of physical experience for women. Because Dickinson claims this connection in a poem in which the speaker anticipates having sex for the first time, proposing that sexual intercourse will have a radical effect on the speaker's existence, Dickinson means to posit an analogy between sex and death in their fundamental influence over women's bodies. The married female body no longer has an intact hymen, is vulnerable to pregnancy, and becomes the sexual property of a husband. After a woman dies, she is constrained by a God in heaven instead of a husband on Earth. Both the husband and the God are patriarchal figures that possess both legal and spiritual dominion over female bodies and souls. A woman can thus anticipate relationships with a husband in marriage and with a God in the afterlife with similar expectations.

Dickinson establishes the speaker as a soon-to-be-married person in the first line of the poem, when she declares that she will be "A Wife – at daybreak." The speaker situates herself as anticipatory; she has not yet encountered the transformation from "Maid" to "Wife." However, when she "passes" from "Midnight," the speaker expects that she will meet "Sunrise" and obtain the title of "Wife." Because the speaker speaks only of her current state of anticipation and her expectations for her transformation, the poem is prospective: it gives no information about the speaker's previous experiences as a "Maid."

The speaker will transform from a "Maid" to a "Wife" when she has sexual intercourse with her husband, the "Future," for the first time. The speaker also refers to the "Future" figure

as “Eternity,” “Sir,” and “Master,” when she directly addresses him, which denotes the gender of this figure as male. The male figure must ascend a staircase (“Softly – my Future climbs the Stair –”) in order to physically approach the speaker, which means that the speaker is awaiting the arrival of the male figure within a space that is upstairs in a house—a bedroom. When the male figure converges with the speaker in physical space, their bodies will form a union during sex, and the speaker will no longer be a “Maid,” but a titled “Wife.” Thus, the speaker is waiting for the male figure to arrive in the bedroom to consummate their marriage with sexual intercourse.

Dickinson purposefully obscures the identity of the male figure in order to collapse the differences in identity between husband and God. Dickinson’s suppression of the identity of the male figure serves to underscore the speaker’s lack of real knowledge about her future as a wife. However, the speaker speaks the poem because she has reached a juncture at which all she can do is attempt to anticipate because the transformative event has become so proximal. It is because the speaker can only attempt to anticipate—though her expectations are vague and potentially inaccurate—that this poem is spoken. For example, the speaker directly addresses “Midnight” twice in the poem, which situates her as awake in a night temporal space. Later in the poem, dawn presumably approaches because the speaker shifts to address “Future” and comments, “Master – I've seen the face – before –.” That the speaker concludes her speech by broaching the topic of recognition inevitably compels the audience to consider the possibility for non-recognition. Dickinson means for her speaker to recognize the face of the male figure, but still employs the idea of the speaker entering into a world of a relative unknown. The poem ends before the identity of the male figure can be divulged and before the speaker actually goes through the transformation from “Maid” to “Wife.”

The transition from “Maid” to “Wife” is a radical change, and it can happen in a very short amount of time. The speaker consistently expresses her perception of the rapidity and impending nature of the transformation from “Maid” to “Wife.” The speaker notes that “at daybreak” she will have transformed, and when she asserts, “How short it takes to make a Bride,” she also recognizes that this transformative time will be all too brief. She uses the adverb “soon” to describe the coming status of being “no more” a “Child.” Because the speaker utilizes increasingly proximate words, such as “short” and “soon,” the speaker becomes increasingly anticipatory of her looming status of “Wife.” When she loses the status of “Child,” she gains the title of “Wife”; she can be one or the other, but not both, and there is no in-between state for children transitioning into “Wifehood.” Like the speaker of Dickinson’s “She rose to His Requirement – dropt” (F857), so too must the speaker of “A Wife – at daybreak” drop “the Playthings of Her Life / To take the honorable Work / Of Woman, and of Wife.” The speaker of “She rose to His Requirement” proclaims the responsibility of a wife to perform certain duties she labels as “honorable Work.” The speaker of “A Wife – at daybreak” is less interested in discussing the responsibilities she will perform than the victory and title she will obtain.

When the speaker narrates from before transformation, she looks toward obtaining the title of “Wife” as a positive outcome of her impending marriage. In the poem “Rearrange a ‘Wife’s’ Affection!” the title of “Wife” will be bestowed with a “diadem” after the speaker has undergone a transformation, and this coronation is an important component of a wife’s understanding of herself. The speaker treats the acquisition of the titles “Wife” and “Bride” as states of being that will arrive inevitably with the sunrise. Instead of inquiring whether or not she will receive her title, the speaker instead asks, “Sunrise – Hast thou a Flag for me?” Evidently, the speaker is highly interested in considering her marriage a victory. In fact, the speaker goes on

to state that when the sun rises, “Then – Midnight – I have passed from thee – / Unto the East – and Victory –.” The speaker uses the word “victory” to refer to her journey into “Wifehood” indicating that she considers the acquisition of the title “wife” to be a legitimate successful venture. In this poem, the speaker argues that those who have accomplished “Wifehood” are victorious, while those who remain single are not.

Further, the speaker locates her victory to “the East,” which is both the origin of sunrise and the “exotic” region of the Dickinson’s Victorian globe. That the speaker highlights the exotic “East” as the venue for her “victory” accentuates the imperial associations she holds with victory and conquering. Bearing in mind that Dickinson’s “He put the Belt around my life –” (F330), a poem spoken from the aftermath of transformation, features a patriarchal figure who is described as “imperial,” the prospective “victory” hoped for by the speaker of “A Wife – at daybreak” may be quite tenuous. Within the context of Dickinson’s other poems about transformation at the time of marriage, this poem reads as hopeful but ultimately naïve. In poems like “He put the Belt around my life –,” the speaker has undergone the transformation and narrates her experience as incompatible with the expectations outlined by the speaker of “A Wife – at daybreak.” Dickinson may present these speakers’ testimonies as ultimately discordant because she seeks to depict the transformation from girlhood to “Wifehood” as one of disappointed expectations. Readers are granted access to the testimony of a speaker who has undergone the transformation from “Maid” to “Wife” who speaks not of herself but of her husband as “imperial,” which directly contradicts how the speaker of “A Wife – at daybreak” refers to herself. Once this speaker experiences “Wifehood,” her anticipations will be spoiled and furthermore, the desire for “victory” may never be fulfilled for married women in Emily Dickinson’s poems.

Post-Transformation Perspective

Emily Dickinson's "I'm 'wife' – I've finished that" (F225) seeks to distinguish and define the two physical states of girlhood and wifehood experienced by its female speaker. Each of the two physical states is defined by experiences and sensations felt in the register of bodily senses. Dickinson's poems, "Rearrange a 'Wife's' Affection," "My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun," and "He put the Belt around my life –," among others, pose alternate versions of the transformation described in "I'm 'wife.'" Each poem examines a different combination of the concepts explored in this group of poems, including the physical transformation from "girl" to "wife," the meaning of the title "wife" for both the speaker and her community, the positive and negative experiences of a person after the transformation, and the similarities between the states of marriage and death.

"I'm 'wife'" is told from the perspective of a created "wife" persona who reflects on her previous experience as a "girl" and her current state of "wife"—though she has difficulty recalling her experiences prior to becoming a wife. When the "wife" attempts to title the "Girl-state" in the initial lines of the poem, she stutters: "I've finished that – / That other state." The repetition of the word "that" indicates that the "wife" struggles to find a word that accurately describes her previous physical state. The anadiplosis of "that" serves to emphasize the speaker's waning memory of her former state of being. The speaker is far more certain in her pronouncements that she is "wife," "Czar," and "Woman" than she is about "that – / That other state –." The speaker's failure to assign a name to "that other state" until the second stanza reflects her uncertainty about her personal status. This uncertainty is mirrored in the final lines of the stanza in which the "wife" questions her decision to compare these two states at all: "But why compare? / I'm 'Wife'! Stop there!"

The speaker's tone is remarkably distant; she limits her expression to pithy phrases that are disjointed and syntactically incomplete. For example, the speaker describes wifehood ("it") as "safer so –." In this instance, "wife" is using "so" as a conjunction, meaning to compare wifehood and girlhood, but lacking a direct object to convey girlhood. The detached tone and incomplete syntax render "wife" emotionally constrained, incapable of fully expressing what she is attempting to express. For ten lines, the speaker transcends the "soft Eclipse" by discussing her transformation, but a remarkable shift occurs when she feels herself approaching ideas she would rather not consider in the final two lines of the poem. She then terminates the poem by exclaiming "But why compare? / I'm "Wife"! Stop there!"

Not only has "wife" "arrive[d]" at the end of "That other state," she has also "accomplish[ed]" all she needs to have successfully completed girlhood, a state of existence that can be terminated by ruptures in identity, such as at the time of marriage. The physical transformation from girl to wife is eternal. When Dickinson's speakers become wedded, they also engage in sexual intercourse and their bodies are altered; like their hymens, their identities are irreversibly ruptured. Once a speaker has crossed the threshold of "wife," she cannot turn around and reassume her identity as a "girl," which is reflected in the parallel Dickinson draws between the shift from girlhood to wifehood and the shift from living to the dead. This analogy is outlined in the second stanza when the "wife" explains "How odd the Girl's life looks / Behind this soft Eclipse–" and she proposes that the "Earth feels so / To folks in Heaven – now –." The speaker creates this analogy with the purpose of underscoring that her experience is like "Heaven." The speaker's comparison of these two states emphasizes that the "wife" considers herself to have encountered a transformation that she imagines is as extreme as dying.

Another aspect of wifehood the speaker imagines as extreme are the duties that a wife should perform in order to be considered a legitimate wife. The "wife" in Dickinson's poems "Rearrange a 'Wife's' Affection," "He put the Belt around my Life," and "My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun" address these duties quite explicitly, while the speaker of "I'm 'wife'" gestures to this aspect in her descriptions of herself. "I'm 'wife'" does not use the term "duties" to describe these essential aspects of the "Wife-state," but indicates her wifely duties by providing three alternate nouns that reference her condition: "wife," "Czar," and "Woman." "Wife" and "Woman" are emphasized because they appear in quotation marks; "Czar" is not. "Wife" and "Woman" are terms the speaker feels can be used in place of her name, but she determines her identification with "Czar" to be more metaphorical. The role of a Czar is exceptionally prescribed: a Czar is an "Eastern" monarch who reigns supreme—imperially. The speaker seeks to convey that she sees herself as exceptionally esteemed and powerful. Considering that this speaker constructs her description by creating a dichotomy between girlhood and wifehood, she means to also convey that her experience of girlhood was distinguished by a personal perception of powerlessness.

Even more so than a "Czar," the speaker sees herself primarily as a "wife" and a "Woman." The etymology of the English word "woman" (from the Old English *wiman,* or *wifmon*, which mean "woman-man" and "wife of man") is dependent on the English word "man"—a relationship with a male "other" (*OED*, "woman" n.). In titling the speaker a "Woman," Dickinson subtly reveals the rupture in sovereignty between the words "wife" and "czar," as one is syntactically independent, while the other is syntactically dependent and socially subordinated to another. Even more so than "Woman," a "wife" is defined by her

relationship to a male husband. For the speaker, one's ability to identify with wifehood is determine by one's dependence on a male figure.

The Negative Consequences of Transformation

Emily Dickinson's "He put the Belt around my life –" (F330) is a poem that fundamentally expresses a different version of the transformation portrayed in her other poems about this experience. Instead of focusing on victory, like she does in "Rearrange a 'Wife's' Affection," "My life had stood – a Loaded Gun –," and "A Wife at Daybreak," Dickinson portrays a more negative viewpoint of the relationship between the speaker and her husband. In fact, the speaker, instead of conquer*ing* like she does in "A Wife at Daybreak," actually is conquered. The first stanza serves to show an example of this power-imbalanced relationship. The speaker begins by stating that:

> "He put the Belt around my life
> I heard the buckle snap –
> And turned away, imperial,
> My Lifetime folding up –."

The third line of the poem depicts the completion of the male figure's initial action of belting with the consequent action of having "turned away," an action that is described as "imperial." The speaker refers to the actions of the male figure as "imperial" because their relationship involves a structure of power dynamics that are defined by governance, property law, and domination, in which the speaker is subjugated. Considering that the speaker initiates the poem by describing the physical act of one putting a belt around the "life" of another, it is evident that

their relationship involves not only systematic subjugation, but also the representation of physical constraint for the subjugated person.

The experience of physical constraint is essential to the speaker's understanding of her own compression and transformation. In the first stanza, the speaker states that when the male figure placed the "Belt" around her life, she "heard the Buckle snap –." Because the belt is so tight, the narrator registers the sound of the buckle snapping shut as a sound characteristic of enclosure. The repression she feels has an increasingly powerful effect on her body, and she later describes the sensation as her "Lifetime folding up –." The effect that the constraint has on the speaker's body is so all-encompassing that she can describe the sensation of her "Lifetime" being folded—repeatedly shaped into a smaller size. Dickinson's use of the terms "life" and "Lifetime" underscores her concept of "life" not as an abstract noun, but a concrete one that references a physical body. The "life" described by the speaker possesses a body that can be injured and interacted with by others. Similar to the speaker of "My life had stood – a Loaded Gun –," the embodied "life" of the speaker can be interacted with by a male figure. In "He put the Belt around my life –," the male figure acts upon the body of the speaker by confining her physical form within a "Belt."

The encircling nature of the belt around the physical "life" of the speaker conveys that the relationship between the male figure and the speaker can be considered within the context of marriage. The "belt" is round and encircles the body of the wearer, and therefore evokes both the "diadems" of Dickinson's other poems about marriage and the traditional wedding ring. In these poems, the encircling object placed on the body of a wearer conveys the status of the wearer as that of a married person. The male figure in "He put the Belt around my life –" acts upon the body of the speaker by encircling her with an object, an act of agency such as described in the

first lines represent a similar “wedding” ceremony to poems like “Title divine – is mine –” (F194) and “I’m ceded – I’ve stopped being Theirs –” (F353). This “ceremony” serves as the physical transformation for the speaker—after she undergoes the “Belt,” she shifts from the status of a girl to a “Wife,” her previous “Lifetime folding up –." Dickinson compares the marriage ring to the “ring” of an encircling belt because she seeks to compare the physical constraint of a belt with the marital associations of a ring. In this poem, a wedding ring is an oppressive physical constraint.

It is no mistake that Dickinson configures the timeline of “He put the Belt around my life –” so that the belting is the first action within the poem; she seeks to orient this action as occurring previous to the actions described later in the poem. Dickinson also uses the past tense for the first three lines of the poem, only switching to the present participle “folding” in the fourth line to denote the continuous action that begins at that moment. Dickinson then switches to the present tense in the fifth line with the word “Deliberate,” and does not stray from this tense for the remainder of the poem. Dickinson’s manipulation of the timeline from past to present establishes that the speaker is conveying her experience as continuous, and that her present experience began after the male figure “put the Belt” around her “life.” Dickinson also uses the adverb “Henceforth” in the seventh line to denote her experience as having occurred on a strict timeline, with her current experience as oriented after the belting. The speaker’s use of present tense to characterize her experience as continuous indicates not only that the speaker is communicating from after transformation, but within a realm of eternal marriage.

Like “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –” and “I’m ‘wife,’” “He put the Belt around my life –” includes a strict timeline and a jumbled syntax—perhaps because all three speakers have undergone the transformation from girl to wife and are speaking from increasingly

compressed experiences. For example, the speaker of "He put the Belt" speaks in the past tense of a previous experience, so she establishes that she can compare her current state to a previous one. However, in all three poems, the speaker's description of a previous state is limited. In "He put the Belt," the speaker's only reference to her previous state occurs when she recounts her experience of being belted; presumably she relays being belted because she was not before constrained in such a way. When she becomes restrained, she transforms into a physical being that is distinct from her previous one. Incapable of fully recognizing that she has undergone a transformation, the speaker disjointedly refers to her past and then moves to narrate her present condition.

Not only does the bulk of the poem occur after the physical transformation of the speaker; the "devotion" of the speaker also follows transformation. After the speaker situates the poem in the present tense, and using the word "Henceforth," she describes herself as "a Dedicated sort –." From the aftermath of the transformation on, the speaker has determined her role as one that is definitively "Dedicated," meaning that devotion is a crucial attribute of her new experience. This manifestation of devotion is remarkably different from the kind she describes in "Rearrange a 'Wife's' Affection," in which the speaker's dedication arises before her transformation from girl to wife. The speaker of "Rearrange a 'Wife's' Affection" makes the argument that because she has performed a sufficient level of devotion, she can be titled a wife, while the speaker of "He put the Belt around my life –" observes that her devotion materializes only after she has undergone the transformation. It is likely that the speaker of "Rearrange a 'Wife's' Affection" feels that she can call herself a wife, but after a physical transformation from girl to wife, the speaker will again call attention to her attribute of devotion and distinguish that devotion as continuous.

The speaker of "He put the Belt around my life –" may not feel "entitled" in the same way as the other speakers because her post-transformation experience is depicted as remarkably negative. For example, the speaker of "He put the Belt around my life—" describes herself performing "the little Toils" and that she must "deal occasional smiles" in her new role. That she uses the word "Toils" to refer to her duties highlights these activities as work, not as pleasure. Further, her description of the need to "deal occasional smiles" indicates that the smiles that are dealt, and not genuine. Not only does the speaker consider her new obligations as work, but she does not take genuine pleasure in doing them, and she may feel quite negatively about her new duties. If these duties align with the duties of a traditional bourgeois Victorian housewife, they may have included regular sexual intercourse, the bearing and rearing of children, and the upkeep of the house. The speaker motions to her duties in socializing when she describes her "occasional smiles"—which would presumably be dealt to persons who expect her to interact socially in a particular fashion—and when she states that she must "make the Circuit of the Rest"—an allusion to the social circuit in which housewives were expected to take part. The duties that the speaker performs further constrain her in that they lay out terms of expectations to which she is obliged to adhere. The speaker discusses the duties she must perform in order to lay out the terms of her marriage, but intermixed with these phrases is language associated with heaven and death. In stitching together these topics, Dickinson means to emphasize her parallel between marriage and death.

Dickinson deliberately allows for interpretations of the speaker as both newly married and newly dead because her ultimate project serves to highlight the enormous transformation that a woman undergoes when she experiences marriage or death. Dickinson describes her speaker, post-transformation, as becoming a "Member of the Cloud," which invokes heaven. After

Dickinson's speaker undergoes her transformation, she experiences her "Lifetime folding up –," and the ascension into a new form of life in the "Cloud." The speaker describes her new conferred status as "Member of the Cloud" in order to emphasize that she must abandon previous identities (associated with an autobiographical past) and take up a new identity within a physical setting that is distinct and physically separate from the physical setting in which her original "Lifetime" existed. Additionally, Dickinson's speaker invokes the language of invitation in the second stanza when she describes "lives that stoop to notice mine – / And kindly ask it in –," and even the receipt of an actual "invitation." When the speaker undergoes her transformation, she physically moves from one setting to another, and this second physical setting has a strict membership: invitation-only. Dickinson, here, again conflates the experiences of one entering a new social space (such as a congregation or neighborhood) with the experiences of entering heaven.

In fact, the obscured identity of the male figure in "He put the Belt around my life –" is another narrative maneuver enacted by Dickinson to accentuate the similarities of marriage and death; the "He" could be a patriarchal husband or a patriarchal God. Dickinson does not define the male figure in this poem, but she does describe him as "imperial," which again highlights his position as one of overwhelming power over the existence of another. In this analysis, it matters not whether the patriarchal figure is identified as either husband or God because both figures have the same function in the life of the female speaker. This function is defined by the patriarch's relationship to the subjugated other—the role that the speaker must fulfill is that of a compressed person, and the patriarchal God/husband must retain an uncompromising degree of physical power over the body and actions of that person. Dickinson's conflation of God and

husband emphasizes that the "compression" of a woman by her husband resembles the "compression" of women by God.

Dickinson also describes the actions of the patriarchal figure as "Deliberate, as a Duke would do / A Kingdom's Title Deed—," which serves to further emphasize the "imperial" power that he holds. The speaker describes the "Duke['s]" domination over her both as physical constriction and as property ownership with her use of the phrase "Title Deed." In terms of legal power, Dickinson gestures to the transfer of a woman's legal identity (her "life") to a husband upon marriage. God does not possess explicit legal power, but in accordance with Protestant religious doctrine, God would have absolute authority, a form of ownership over the speaker. Dickinson use of the term "Title Deed" again accentuates a different form of conquering and victory than she describes in poems such as "A Wife at Daybreak" and "Rearrange a 'Wife's' Affection" because the speaker is subjugated by the male patriarchal figure instead of achieving victory and conquest herself. But of these three poems, "He put the Belt around my life –" is the only poem in which the speaker speaks from the state that comes after transformation, so she is actually experiencing the "Wifehood" firsthand, while the other two narrators are only speculating. Therefore, though the speakers of "A Wife at Daybreak" and "Rearrange a 'Wife's' Affection" have optimistic outlooks for their wedded lives, the speaker of "He put the Belt around my life—" may be experiencing "real" marriage. The other speakers are thus unfortunately fated to experience this same kind of oppressive "Wifehood."

Additionally, the "title" described in "A Wife at Daybreak" and "Rearrange a 'Wife's' Affection" refers to the title of "wife" conferred on the speakers, while the "title" of "He put the Belt around my life—" is described as a "Title Deed," in terms of property rights. The speaker invokes the language of property rights in order to emphasize the legal power that the patriarchal

figure of this poem possesses over her; this “wife” may consider herself to be the legal “property” of the patriarchal figure. Therefore, the “Wifehood” experienced by the speaker of “He put the Belt around my life—” is considerably more oppressive, subjugated, and specifically lawful than the “Wifehood” of Dickinson’s pre-transformation poems. In fact, in alternate lines of “He put the Belt around my life—," the speaker states that after the male figure puts the “Belt” around her life, he then “left his process—satisfied,” meaning that his act of compression was completed correctly and diligently. Dickinson’s inclusion of this alternate line along with the term “Title Deed” inevitably invokes the concept of secular patriarchy at the hands of an Earthly husband because the compression experienced by the speaker is dictated not only by God, but by law.

Prospective, Physical “Wifehood”

Within Emily Dickinson’s “Rearrange a "Wife's" Affection!” (F267), a female speaker gives voice to the complexity of defining “Wifehood.” The argument she presents centers on the idea that one who performs the devotion of a wife can call herself so because devotion is the most essential aspect of “Wifehood.” The speaker conveys her experiences with marital devotion and marital status by focusing on her performance of the duties she has claimed merit her conferring the title of “wife,” but she creates a timeline on which she orients herself as approaching a titled existence. In doing so, the speaker compares her prospective change in marital status to death in terms of physical transformation and change in social status because she uses terminology that invokes death. The speaker’s transformation to wife and subsequent coronation occur specifically because the speaker has displayed her devotion and performed the duties of a “Wife” for “Seven years,” though the speaker has not yet conferred the title of a wife.

Dickinson uses quotation marks around the word “wife” in the first line to indicate that she performs the correct duties but has not really secured the literal title of “wife.”

The first stanza of “Rearrange a ‘Wife’s’ Affection!” starkly depicts the features of the speaker’s corporeal body by rendering the surgical removal of body parts, including the speaker’s “Brain,” “Affection,” and “freckled Bosom.” The “‘Wife’s’ Affection” is found within the speaker’s brain and might be “dislocate[d],” somewhat like a lobe within the brain may be affected if the brain were to be dissected. The “’Wife’s’ Affection” is then characterized as an innate part of the speaker’s brain, one that the speaker considers to have an essential function, especially in characterizing her emotions and actions. Because the “Affection” is represented as that of a “Wife,” it is clear that the speaker means to depict herself as having an inextricable quality within her corporeal body that makes her a wife. Importantly, the “‘Wife’s’ Affection” is subject to “Rearrange[ment]” but it cannot be fully “Amputate[d]” like the speaker’s “Bosom,” which the speaker sees as more subject to exterior forces. The speaker can be physically transformed from a female figure, but her “’Wife’s’ Affection” can only be displaced. This distinction would imply that a female body can be fundamentally changed, but there will remain an inherent material quality of “Wifehood” within the body, even if this quality is “dislocate[d].” The speaker thus cannot even be transformed into someone who is not a wife, even if her corporeal body is fundamentally changed. This stanza is essential to the idea that the speaker is naturally inclined to be a wife, even if, as she establishes later, she may not necessarily be titled one just yet. In fact, the speaker’s claim that “Wifehood” is an identity that can transcend bodily manifestation also implies that “Wifehood” is an identity that is essential to an individual’s experience of death.

Dickinson utilizes language that evokes imagery of death at the time of the speaker's transformation in order to underscore how similar the speaker's bodily transformation is to the "spiritual" transformation that happens to people when they die. Both transformations are immense (they affect the entirety of the transformed subject's existence of being) and irreversible: once one becomes a wife or a corpse, there is no turning back. The only difference between these two types of transformations is that one is centered on a transformation of the body, while the other is an effective transformation of the soul (one that is characterized by an abandonment of the body), though the speaker allows for frequent crossover between these interpretations. Dickinson experiments with this idea in the final two stanzas of the poem, in which the speaker anticipates the triumphant change she will undergo at the time of her bodily transformation, explicitly speaking of transformation in death and in union. For example, Dickinson's speaker mentions in the fourth stanza that she wears "the 'Thorns' till *Sunset* – / Then – my Diadem put on." As is often the case in Dickinson's poems, "sunset" is used metaphorically to describe a temporal transition to either marriage or death. Dickinson's use of the word "Diadem" also emphasizes this parallel, as she often uses symbols of royalty and coronation to compare death and marriage. In the final stanza, the speaker notes that her "Secret" will be led by its "Weary Keeper" "through the Grave." The speaker's use of the word "Grave" locates the scene in an imagined graveyard, again evoking the theme of death at the time of marriage. The speaker feels that her moment of transformation will be a moment of liberation of her "*bandaged*" secret, and this liberation can occur precisely because her transformation is like death, a liberation of the soul.

This physical move to the setting of the "Grave" is triumphant for the speaker: when she reveals her secret, she will be liberated from having to keep it. Additionally, the speaker

anticipates that she will be liberated from the physical pain she has experienced from keeping her secret. The speaker describes her "troth" in terms of "narrow pain," "Burden," and "Anguish – bare of anodyne!" When the speaker reveals her secret, she will presumably feel a sense of relief from her years of "Anguish" because she will no longer need to keep the secret "*bandaged*." Though the speaker emphasizes the "Burden" of pain that she experiences because she keeps her secret, she is quick to note that her pain is "borne so far triumphant." She refers to her pain as "triumphant" because feels that her experience of pain is ultimately a positive one; therefore, she qualifies for martyrdom.

The speaker considers herself to be qualified enough to claim "Wifehood" because of the duties she has performed without the title of "Wife": she has learned more in "Seven years of troth," the speaker says, than she "ever may" as a wife. The "troth" that the speaker claims to have completed is characterized by a sense of devotion to the subject of future union (the "thee" of the final stanza) despite the lack of physical proximity between the two. Additionally, the physical and emotional sensation that the speaker undergoes because of her situation is intense:

> Love that never leaped its socket –
> Trust entrenched in narrow pain –
> Constancy thro' fire – awarded –
> Anguish – bare of anodyne!
>
> Burden – borne so far triumphant –

The physical and emotional sensations that the speaker undergoes in the name of her devotion are characterized by their polarity: "Love," "pain," and "Anguish" are all experienced by the speaker, and often in conjunction. When the speaker performs her devotion well through "Constancy," she is "awarded – / Anguish – bare of anodyne." When the speaker experiences the

emotion of "Trust," she notes that it is also "entrenched in narrow pain." Furthermore, the speaker describes herself as withholding in that her "Love…never leaped its socket." The devotion that the speaker performs is represented as dualistic; it is both "triumphant" and full of anguish; it is deliciously painful—painful because the speaker must withhold herself until she actually does undergo the transformation that will allow her to "unbandage" her secret—of devotion.

The speaker uses the speculative "ever may" in relation to "Wifehood," in order to anticipate "Wifehood" for herself as a future experience. Because she anticipates a moment of revelation and union in the final stanza, she perceives this "Wifehood" to prospectively occur when she passes "through the Grave." The speaker also addresses the poem to an unnamed person, whom she identifies as "thee" in the final lines of the poem. The addressed figure "thee" is located in the "Grave," so the endpoint of the speaker's journey is not just an abstract realm, but an addressed person.

Because the speaker deploys the topic of "Wifehood" and discusses a reunification with a subject, "thee," this poem is fundamentally invested in the concept of physical union between two subjects. This type of union is particularly exciting to the speaker because she can enter into union with a person with whom she is physically separated. The speaker can enjoy her sense of martyrdom and devotion because her object of affection exists in a space that is inaccessible to her, but that she anticipates will one day be accessible. The speaker does not signify that the "Grave" is a space of physical existence, but because she spends a significant portion of the poem discussing physicality, the speaker is clearly preoccupied with physical sensation, and she may be anticipating physical union in the "Grave." Additionally, the speaker juxtaposes her present-tense experience with the existence of the person in "the Grave" in order to underscore

inaccessibility and disunion between the pair, and this disunion, she proposes, will be terminated when she enters "the Grave." She then makes the conclusion that union will occur between herself and subject once she enters the realm of the dead, and this union will happen simultaneously when she is relieved from the "Burden" that is her "Secret," all of which will occur when she transforms into a titled "Wife."

The speaker may consider herself to be more experienced as a "Wife" because she values pain and withholding more than indulging in declarations of pre-marital love and desire. She may even consider pain to be an essential duty of a "Wife's"—and that wives who have undergone pain are better wives than ones who do not. In fact, especially in terms of physical pain, the speaker makes the argument that she should experience martyrdom when she wears "the 'Thorns' till Sunset," a reference to Jesus Christ's crucifixion and crown of thorns, because of her years of suffering and devotion. When the speaker's suffering has come to an end at "Sunset," she will be rewarded with marriage, eternity, and crucially, her "Diadem put on." The speaker thinks of herself as possessing the potential to become the ultimate wife, as she has performed the years of devotion and suffering, she feels that she is naturally inclined to become a wife, and she is certain that when she undergoes her transformation, she will be conferred with a title and a crown—her victory.

The speaker of "Rearrange a 'Wife's' Affection" narrates from before an actual transformation. She believes that she could understand what she would feel like after undergoing the change from untitled (girl) to titled (Wife), but because she has yet to experience the transformation, she can have no real conception. In "I'm 'wife' – I've finished that – " (F225) the speaker has undergone the transformation from girl to wife and even describes the sensation of being alienated from girlhood because the transformation from girl to wife has changed

everything about her. In reading these two poems in conjunction, it is clear that though the speaker of “Rearrange a "Wife's" Affection!” feels prepared to take on the title of “wife” because she is faithful, she still has to undergo the transformation which will change everything about her. She may have prepared herself for becoming a wife, but she still has to undergo a radical transformation and will likely not remember much from before her transformation, as the speaker from “I’m ‘wife’” does not. Instead, she anticipates what she imagines will occur at and after transformation: the wearing of the “Diadem” (which will happen at the time of the transformation) and that the person with whom she has been prepared to unify will be waiting for her just beyond the threshold of the transformation. Thus, the speaker really only touches on topics regarding her own preparation for the transformation and her anticipation of it. Like the typical Victorian lack of speculation about what heaven would look and feel like, it seems to not even occur to the speaker to contemplate what “Wifehood” will look like once she has taken up the “Diadem” of marriage.

The Ultimate “Wifehood”: Loss of Autonomy and Identity

Emily Dickinson’s “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –” (F764) depicts the relationship between a gun and its owner, which serves as a metaphor for the relationship between a patriarchal husband-“Owner” and his wife. The speaker of this poem utilizes language that implies a close physical relationship between the “Owner” and herself which resembles marriage. The poem commences by introducing the audience to a “Loaded Gun” who seems to be standing idly in a corner, waiting to be used by her owner. Dickinson metaphorizes the speaker’s “Life” as a “Loaded Gun” in the first stanza by telling the audience directly (“had stood”). That the gun refers to her “self” as a “Loaded Gun” indicates the materiality of a “Life” that can be embodied by an object. Additionally, the gun does not use the subjective pronoun “I”

to refer to herself until after she has been picked up by the owner and "carried" into the second stanza. Instead, the gun refers only to herself as the objective pronoun "Me"—and refers to her life with the possessive-objective pronoun "My" in the first stanza. The gun's delayed use of the subjective pronoun "I" finally occurs when she shoots: "every time I speak for Him / The Mountains straight reply—." Thus, the speaker only refers to herself as a grammatical subject until she has both been "carried…away" by the owner and has begun being used for the specific purpose of hunting.

The speaker as gun does not perceive her existence prior to use by the owner as important to her narrative. She gives only a brief summary of her previous experience: "My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun – / In Corners." Because the prepositional phrase, "In Corners" is separated from the previous syntactical phrase "My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –" by a line break and paired with the interrupting prepositional phrase "till a Day," it is clear that the gun means to gloss over her previous existence briskly before she commences on what she perceives to be the more important topic: her possession by her owner. The gun speaks in terms of her relationship with her husband—not about her experiences before or after her convergence with him. Much like the transformation of a single Victorian girl to a wife, the arrival of a husband endows a girl's life with meaning and usefulness, which she apparently could not have acquired without his direct physical contact. So, the transformation that the gun undergoes from girl to wife becomes physically crystalized when the owner touches her body, "carries" her away to her new life as a wife, and begins using her. The gun is thrilled—she was created for this purpose, and as a wife, her existence acquires tangible meaning. The "Owner" serves as both a source of purpose and of mobility for the inanimate gun, as the gun's objective body is incapable of movement without the influence of an outside force.

The immobility of the gun is inadvertently emphasized by the gun's use of the word "stood" in describing its physical action until the owner enters the setting. The word "stood" indicates an alert and still physical position. The gun also uses the past perfect "had stood," thus referring to the completion of the act of standing in the past tense before the commencement the entrance of the owner. Because the gun is an inanimate object, she is incapable of acting herself unless she is acted upon by an exterior force. The only times she has the opportunity to act are when she is acted upon, and during those times she does not get to choose which actions she takes—the external force always chooses for her. The gun similarly acts by being acted upon in the second and third stanzas when the owner and the gun hunt. In shooting, the gun "speaks for" the owner, meaning that the gun takes part in an action that is begun by the owner, and her participation in the action involves the owner's use of her body to complete it.

When reading "Loaded Gun" through a patriarchal framework, Dickinson obscures the identity of the "Owner" which leads to the conflation of two of the possible relationships that the "Owner" may have with the gun: her husband and her God. In this interpretation, the relationship between a husband and wife is like the relationship between a God and a female subject, and also vice versa. In this instance, the "Owner" has all-encompassing control of the gun and is physically intimate with the gun. The gun describes herself (in bed) with the Owner after their "good day done," herself lying awake, determined to "Guard" her "Master's Head" instead of sleeping. The poem depicts the pair in bed, and this type of physical intimacy would indicate marriage. That the gun feels the need to lay awake and guard her Owner while he sleeps comfortably on the "Eider Duck's / Deep Pillow" underscores that the gun is devoted. Despite that the reader does not have access to the owner's perceptions of his relationship to the gun, the gun's observations of the owner and descriptions of the owner's physical repositioning of her

body indicate that the owner exists in a mutually beneficial, intimate relationship with the gun, in which the roles for each participant are predetermined. These roles are predetermined because the gun emphasizes that she is fulfilling a duty that she was *created* to perform—the mechanisms of her physical body were decided before she even came into existence. The owner's role in their relationship is to give meaning to the gun's existence by using her physical body to perform the various duties for which she was created. The gun's primary role is to take part in these duties—which include hunting, shooting, and guarding, and I will later argue that these duties metaphorically represent the duties of a housewife.

The gun utilizes language that implies a relationship between herself and her owner that represents marriage. The speaker narrates her first encounter with the owner as him having "carried me away." When the owner carries the gun away, he physically holds the speaker's entire body in his hands. This moment of physical closeness between the pair and physical dependence of the gun on the owner resembles the bodily proximity of husbands to wives during the post-wedding tradition of husbands carrying their wives into their new home. Dickinson initiates the poem with this scene in order to characterize the relationship between the pair as that of a wedded couple consummating their marriage. Additionally, because there are few figures in the poem (the only other animate being is the "Doe") the owner and gun are isolated, just as a Victorian domestic space is from the public sphere. The poem is spoken from the perspective of the gun-wife, and so the isolated aspect of the poem mimics the isolated physical experience of a Victorian wife—the owner as husband can exit the domestic sphere, but the gun was brought into being for the purpose of performing duties within the domestic space. Though Dickinson describes a vast natural setting in the second stanza, this space is the realm in which the gun is meant to perform her prescribed duties, and so this setting serves as a proxy for the setting that is

the domestic space. The gun proceeds to describe herself and the owner as physically intimate, and herself as devoted to the owner, which further indicates that their relationship is marital.

If the relationship between the gun and owner is marital, the gun's devotion is similar to a wife's devotion—she acknowledges that she was endowed with certain responsibilities which she is determined to carry out. The duties of a typical bourgeois Victorian-era housewife involved regular sexual intercourse, the bearing and rearing of children, and the upkeep of the house. The gun renders these responsibilities into the actions that a gun is physically capable of undertaking. She stands idly, she hunts, she shoots, and she guards. The shooting and hunting in which the gun takes part are similar to the act of sex in which wives take part. The gun views the "sex" in which she is participating as the active influence of the owner's body over the passive receptor which she perceives as her own body. It is with the physical influence of the owner's hands over the gun's body that allows her to shoot—a metonymy for orgasm. The act of killing doe, engaged in by the combined "We" of owner and gun, becomes highly eroticized. The gun is pleased to participate in this act—shooting is the activity for which she was designed to perform, similar to the conception that women were designed to perform the act of sexual intercourse in order to bear children. According to the logic of this poem, as women were designed to be sexual objects used by men for the purpose of bearing children, guns were designed to be objects used by men for the purpose of hunting. Dickinson's argument, then, is that women and guns are similar because they were designed to be used by men for singular purposes, and the primary responsibility of this speaker is to engage in sexual intercourse with her owner. That the gun indicates her pleasure in shooting hints at the occurrence of orgasm during sex:

> And do I smile, such cordial light
> Opon the Valley glow -

It is as a Vesuvian face

Had let it's pleasure through –

The "smile," "cordial light," "glow," and "pleasure" of the "Vesuvian face" indicate the warm satisfaction that the gun perceives in shooting for the owner; her experience of being physically used by another is wholly pleasurable. The gun takes gratification in being used by her owner for the purposes for which she was created. The gun feels that there is no other meaning in her life—she is meant to perform the duties for which her body was created and does not seek further existential meaning.

After the owner and gun finish their "good day done," the fourth stanza depicts the gun describing her experience in bed with the owner. Instead of joining the owner in sleep, the gun describes herself "guard[ing]" her owner and contemplating the fragility of her owner's life. The gun begins this reflection by boasting— "none stir the second time" when her owner is threatened and her power is deployed. The speaker describes both the owner's and her own degrees of mortality in the final stanza of the poem when she states that:

Though I than He – may longer love

He longer must – than I –

For I have but the power to kill,

Without – the power to die –

Because a gun is an inanimate object, it has neither the capacity to live nor die, but Dickinson complicates this notion by not only endowing a gun with a "Life," but by having the gun contemplate her mortality in this final stanza. The gun explicitly states that she is immortal; she is "Without – the power to die –." Especially in this final stanza, Dickinson draws on her established parallel between marriage and death. As a "wife," the gun would have already

experienced the physical transformation that resembles death. If the gun has experienced marriage-death, her experience of wedded life is parallel to the experience of immortality in heaven. Therefore, the speaker's direct assertion of her own immortality serves to invoke the sense that the speaker is experiencing marital life in terms of the aspects of death and immortality that Dickinson has charted in her other poems, including the sensation of ceaseless eternity. By drawing this parallel, Dickinson also seeks to combine the patriarchal figures of the husband and the God. When the gun states that the owner "longer must – than I –," she calls attention to the degree of immortality that he possesses, which she identifies as similarly eternal.

Additionally, Dickinson uses shifting past, present, and future tenses to orient the gun within the timeline toward the existence of the owner. In the first stanza, the speaker uses past tense verbs ("had," "passed," "identified," and "carried"). In the second, third, fourth, and fifth stanzas, the speaker uses present tense verbs ("roam," "smile," "guard," and "stir") as well as the preposition "now" in the second stanza to establish the present as current time space. The final stanza uses the auxiliary verb "may" to convey speculation on the part of the speaker. This timeline establishes the speaker as speaking in the present tense, but she begins by reflecting on when the owner arrives and she begins to be useful. Without the owner, she does not perceive a reason to exist—her physical body was created for the specific purpose of being used by another—not in a way that she could ever independently be useful. The temporal structure of this poem emphasizes what the gun considers to be the essential component of her narrative: her relationship with her owner. By manipulating the poem's timeline in this way, Dickinson makes the argument that once girls become wives, they consider themselves as inanimate objects without the presence of their husbands. Wives believe that a husband confers meaning onto their

lives, and they are only useful when they are being used by their husbands in specific ways, especially in terms of sex and reproduction.

In “My Life had stood,” Dickinson portrays the experiences of an object within a certain social-physical world who navigates within the system of that world, adhering to her prescribed purpose without ever considering a life exterior to the social system in which she participates. The gun believes that her value is afforded by her usefulness to her owner, and she finds great pleasure in assessing her own value. As a “Loaded Gun,” the speaker has the potential to kill at any given time, and yet she is incapable of doing so unless she is wielded by another. Here, Dickinson complicates the power dynamics between a husband and wife by making the wife physically powerful, but only in the hands of a husband. Thus, a wife is most useful to her husband when she adheres to her designated function—which is determined by the patriarchy—and performs her duties as a wife. Accordingly, a husband also provides mobility for his wife, as well as the venue to display her power, which are benefits that his wife can enjoy tremendously, especially in deriving satisfaction from her perceived success as a wife. For the speaker of “My Life had stood,” victory can be achieved in embracing one’s societal role as an immobile object, and the apprehension that one is being oppressed may not even cross one’s mind because the satisfaction derived from social success feels like bliss.

Conclusion

Emily Dickinson’s marriage poems do not display an overt political manifesto; instead, they depict a deep understanding of the social structures that lead to the inevitable subjugation of women. Dickinson used poetry as the medium through which she articulated strenuous feminist analyses of power dynamics in marriages because she recognized the function of poetry as her

personal vocation. Dickinson interrogates the position of women in marriage, examining both the benefits women could procure from entering marriage, while also investigating the ways marriage could be deeply injurious for women. Marriage served as a fundamental shift in women's lives, and Dickinson observed this phenomenon from a position exterior to actual marriage—as Dickinson herself remained unmarried. From this exterior position, Dickinson smartly noted that marriage resembled death in that it affected all aspects of a woman's life. In the poems I have analyzed, girls look hopefully toward their experiences as wives, while wives think back on their experiences as girls and note the unexpected and significant changes that they have undergone. Dickinson chooses to represent the experience of marriage from multiple subject positions because she recognizes that the individual perspectives of her speakers cannot fully represent the life of a woman like the collective accounts made by the girls and wives who speak for Emily Dickinson.

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